

More music people should know about.

Dan Montgomery and Tom Heyman: Songwriters on the blue side of sin.

by Peter Stone Brown

Dan Montgomery is a singer-songwriter from Memphis whose fourth indie album, *Sin, Repent, Repeat* (Fantastic Yes) is being released Tuesday. Montgomery's [website](#) humorously proclaims "I'm An Americana Artist And I Have No Guilt," but he is far more than just another Americana singer-songwriter. A master of the hook line as well as a wizard of the punch line, Montgomery is a musician with an encyclopedic knowledge of rock and roll and all the music it came from. *Sin, Repent, Repeat* is an album dominated by fierce rockers (Montgomery once led a band named Del Pez) punctuated every few songs by simply gorgeous ballads that perfectly offset the rockers.

Born in Philadelphia, Montgomery spent a good deal of his life in South Jersey occasionally moving to other parts of the country before settling in Memphis. Like a far more well known singer-songwriter from New Jersey, Montgomery has created a world of characters and stories that create a portrait of working class life. The songs on this album as well as the songs on his previous album, *You'll Never Be A Bird* released in 2010, add up to a portrait of people hanging on by the slimmest of threads in a constant struggle not only for survival, but against the enemy within. This struggle is exemplified by *You'll Never Be A Bird*'s opening song, "Working On A Building." Clearly inspired by the gospel song of the same name, Montgomery sings, "I'm working a building, but it keeps falling down," whereas the building in the original song is "for my lord." The following song "I.O.U.S.A" includes this line in the second verse: You talk about change - that's all I've got/And mostly I find it sweeping this parking lot.

On *Sin, Repent, Repeat*, relationships never last, are often doomed before they start, and rumination takes place on a bar stool. Desperation is a given, as well as the feeling that the people in these songs are always on the verge of committing some illicit activity. Hovering in a hazy background is a feeling of maybe I should have listened to my parents, paid attention in school and had some kind of faith.

All of this is taking place over searing rock and roll played by superb musicians. Many of Montgomery's rockers are built around guitar riffs that sound familiar, but you can't exactly place them. The melodies

are the lyrics tend to come back in your mind hours after the CD stopped playing. The album was co-produced by lead guitarist Robert Maché, who was previously in the Continental Drifters and also played with singer-songwriter Steve Wynn. He is the perfect co-conspirator for Montgomery and it is clear that how each song was framed and where it was placed on the album was carefully considered.

Sin, Repent, Repeat leads off with "The Drunken Mouth," a gospel-tinged rocker with Candace Maché echoing Montgomery's thoughts and questions as he finds himself drunkenly spewing inner thoughts he'll later regret. Slowed down, it might've been a perfect song for George Jones, but instead of being mournful it kicks joyously and the piano by Rick Steff recalls Leon Russell at his rocking best.

The second song "Dirty Little Secret" about a girl abused by her uncle when she was a kid, but her family preferred keeping the family name and it affected her whole life, always falling for the wrong man and eventually overdosing. This and many other songs on the album rock so ferociously that it's easy to hear them several times before the realization slips in that there's also a story going on.

Things slow down for the dark and spooky "When I'm Me Again," ultimately a song about drink and depression. Accompanied by acoustic guitar, a vibrato lead and organ, Montgomery sings: When I'm me again/Gonna lose this evil twin/The one addicted to sin, and then later: When I'm me again/Gonna be a happy man/You won't know who I am.

Then comes what is perhaps the hardest rocker "Crack House" kicked off by Maché's menacing lead guitar. The song is about a little kid growing up in a crack house and the chorus should be a rock and roll classic:

Daddy smokes rocks, Mama shoots downs
I take Ritalin to keep my feet on the ground.
There's always someone hanging out, you're never alone
It's not a crack house -
It's a crack home

Montgomery literally growls out the verses and the band never lets up, and Maché's solo is beyond perfect. The song ends with the Von Crack Family Singers who somehow manage to sound like a kids' chorus chanting over and over: Well you know it's a fact/Nobody wants to know you when you live like that, while Maché's guitar reaches unparalleled heights before the song comes to a crashing conclusion.

The mood of the album suddenly gets quieter for one of the most beautiful melodies “The Difference Between Lonely and Alone” about a man who apparently has lost everything. It would be easy to say the arrangement featuring a sweet acoustic lick echoed by an electric is a cross between Memphis soul and country, but in a lot of ways it echoes The Band while never really sounding like them. There’s something incredibly real about the way Montgomery sings: For fifty dollars I can fix that sink/How about twenty and a drink.

The album returns to rocking with “Too Good For Too Long,” and then sort of slows down for “Life’s Funny,” which starts with the line, “She said I got something to tell you/And you know that’s never good,” but it turns into a rocker on the chorus, builds even further on the bridge, to come down for the last verse and build again. Maché’s guitar answers Montgomery’s lyrics perfectly.

The atmosphere loosens slightly for “Audrey and Hank” which starts like it’s going to be a Rolling Stones honky tonk ballad and turns into a ripping minute and a half Jerry Lee Lewis styled rocker with the opening verse, “You come home late when you come home at all/Find your stuff packed up in the hall/So you punch a big ol’ hole in the wall/Fightin’ like Audrey and Hank.” The fight is continued by Maché’s lead guitar, but the song is propelled by Rick Steff’s New Orleans tinged piano.

This sets the stage for the song I feel is the heart of the album an astounding 11 verse, eight minute ballad, “The Thorn” about a relationship doomed from the start, but refuses to end. Starting with a solo acoustic in a minor key, which is joined by a violin played by Theresa Andersonn, other instruments slowly fade in as Montgomery is joined by Candace Maché on vocals turning the song into a duet as the story and the music build. And even though the song is as serious as it gets, Montgomery slyly sneaks in lines such as “It’s probably best we never had that kid.” There are other surprises in the song to come that are best heard and not written about, and in the middle of this acoustic guitar, violin and subtle piano arrangement comes a perfectly placed blazing sustained guitar solo that turns into a call and response with the violin before the song resumes taking it down to build up again. It would be folly to call the song ambitious because it succeeds on every level. The song took Montgomery ten years to complete because he thought he would never get away with writing a song that long, even though he is well acquainted with songwriters who’ve written songs that length and longer. On the strength of this song alone, how it is structured and the story it tells, Montgomery deserves to be considered with the best American singer-songwriters.

There is a brief pause of silence before the album continues with another hard rocker, "Not With You Anymore." Another song of a busted romance, the way Montgomery delivers the opening line "Drove around the block/parked across the street," with such fierce anger, you'd think whatever argument went down happened right before he sang the song.

This is followed by the sweetest song on the album with the prettiest arrangement, "If You Were Mine," but the lyrics run counter to the melody and the sound of the music, starting off with "If you were mine, I'd change everything about you/If you were mine, I'd ruin everything that was good."

"Old Friends" is a swampy rocker that starts with the line: I'm finally at the age where the first thing I read is the obituaries, and then continues later with: It's just the best way I know of looking up old friends. The song which never lets up is dominated by Rick Steff's swirling organ.

The album concludes with Montgomery alone on electric piano on "My Fidelity," easily the most soulful song on the album which has echoes of a hundred great songwriters from Dan Penn to Jackson Browne. Montgomery's voice would never be called pretty and he doesn't try to be, but like that other great rough voiced singer Bob Dylan, he knows how to cut through to the heart of a song and make you feel he's lived every word and more importantly make you feel you've lived it with him.

[Tom Heyman](#) is a singer-songwriter currently living in San Francisco, who also happens to be a great lead guitar player who's worked with Chuck Prophet and John Doe, and also played lead in the band Go To Blazes who moved to Philadelphia in the late '80s, and pretty much dominated the local roots rock scene for a decade. Like Dan Montgomery, Heyman is a storyteller, with an equally massive knowledge of the music. Heyman also has the musical chops to get exactly the sound and mood he is aiming for.

That Cool Blue Feeling (Bohemian Neglect Recording Works) is his third solo album, but his second of all original material. Recorded in Portland, Oregon with a trio of musicians, the overriding mood of the album is one of midnight to morning contemplation that takes place in a haze of pacing the floor desperation. Relationships are always on the verge of crumbling, the daily grind of work/sleep/work is little more than that as the clock is constantly ticking resulting in a dance of daily resignation while the road, of course traveled only at night

constantly beckons, though the protagonist in the songs knows he's probably too old for the adventures of his youth. At the same while dreams may be drowned in the ongoing charade, giving up and quitting are never options.

Heyman has a vivid writing style and a knack for capturing everyday situations in a way that makes the listener instantly relate, whether it's taking the trash out and knowing someone's going to come and collect the bottles or coming home between midnight and dawn, getting stoned and watching the shopping channels on TV.

Influences of innumerable musicians and musical styles can be detected throughout the album in a clearly on-purpose way. Heyman knows way too much about music and record making for it to be otherwise, but the point is Heyman makes all these styles his own though most of the songs are fairly straight rock and roll imbued with a Memphis soul and funk edge. But there's nods to folk and folk rock, Tom Waits, and Gordon Lightfoot among many others.

There are so many strong songs and performances on this album, I'm hesitant to put one above another. But the descriptions of late night existence in both "Cool And Blue" and "In The Nighttime World," where on the latter Heyman's vocal reminds me Al Green at his most laidback. Heyman's storytelling skills on "Time And Money" and "Chickenhawks and Jesus Freaks" are beyond excellent.

Heyman also ends his album with a solo track, the self deprecating "Losers Like Me," sung over softly finger-picked slightly bluesy guitar.

Tom Heyman and Dan Montgomery can usually be found playing bars and clubs in their respective cities, and every so often they may hit the road for small tours. Both these albums deserve to be picked up by American radio and more in a major way.

Dan Montgomery: Sin, Repent, Repeat and Tom Heyman: That Cool Blue Feeling are available at Amazon, iTunes, CD Baby, and all the internet places that helped kill the retail record business.

Peter Stone Brown is a freelance writer and singer-songwriter. His site and blog can be found here: <http://www.peterstonebrown.com/>